

On Giving Books for Christmas

By Burton Rascoe

RIGHT along about this time we all begin to worry over what we are going to send for Christmas. The intelligence and the imagination of most of us are limited, I suspect, in the matter of selecting appropriate gifts, and our deficiency is a source of annual recurrent pain and embarrassment. The technique of ascertaining what will delight and surprise and confer a most delicate compliment upon the recipient is probably a special gift for pleasing, which demands of its possessors tact and alertness and patience. It means overhanging, or giving attention to, a chance remark wherein the tone of the voice, the light in the eyes, the expression about the mouth indicates for the briefest moment that that person would be happy in the possession of some trifle she mentions; it means overhanging or finding out at another time the date of an anniversary, a birthday; and having procured the trifle without delay, waiting some times months for the appropriate occasion and dispatching the gift.

Some very rare beings are able to choose the right gifts by instinct or by a species of mind-reading or divination; they are just born that way, and we who are not, cannot hope to equal them. A decent sort of substitute for it may be acquired by experience or by attention to the experience of some one else. Let me give you three personal happenings which, like the book of etiquette, shows the wrong, the not quite perfect and the perfect way to give. . . . I was in a distant city and as is often the way of married men when they are a little uneasy in their conscience over the fun they are having, I suddenly bethought myself that I should take home a nice present which would recompense my wife in some small measure for staying home and caring for the children while I was gallivanting around hotels and theaters, meeting a lot of jolly people and having a regular lark. (That was a wrong reason for selecting a gift in the first place: giving should be prompted by a desire to please, not as a salve to one's conscience or in a barter-and-trade discharge of debts.) Well, I inquired where the most chic apparel for women might be found. I had made up my mind I wanted to buy a blouse. The first question the saleswoman put to me—"What size, please?"—convicted me as an utter dunderhead in the technique of giving; it had never occurred to me to find out what size clothes my wife wore, and I had to confess as much to the saleswoman. "Is she about my size?" she inquired, and more out of fright lest she should try on the waist I wanted to buy than out of appraisal of her approximation to my wife's size, I said: "No, slimmer and more petite," and cast my eyes anxiously about the room for a face that bore some slight, some vague resemblance, to my wife's, and having found one I pointed her out. "Oh, then she wears about a size forty. Now, what would you like?" There were more harrowing details, but at last I paid a shopping price for a size forty piece of hand-made lace, and a few days later I was lacking in a feeling of virtue and self-satisfaction while my wife excitedly unpacked a blouse which turned out to be just six sizes too big, and which she could not return, make down, or wear—just a total loss almost even to my self-respect.

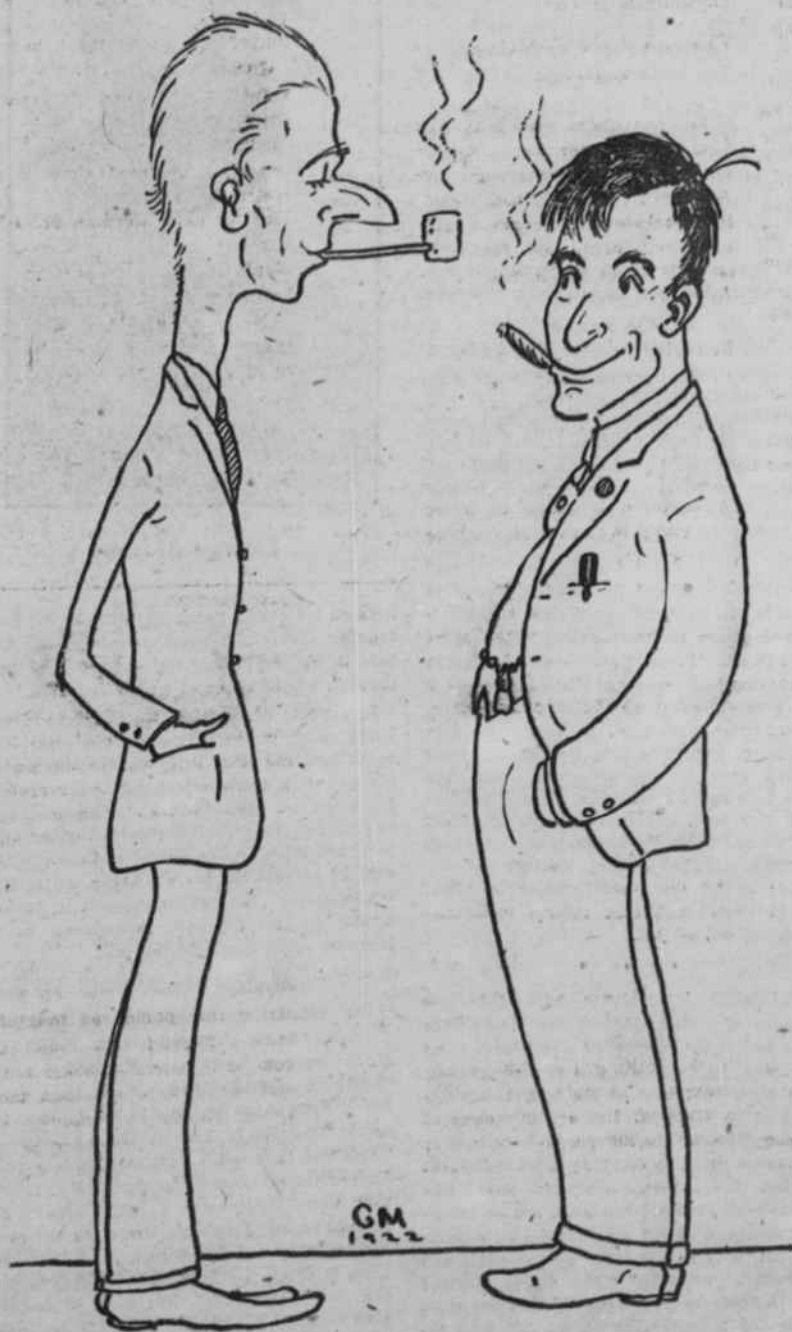
NOW for the almost perfect. Some months ago I was reminiscing to Grant Overton over the pleasure I had derived out of the two volumes of "Memoirs and Records," by the late Lord Fisher, a grand and glorious old sea dog, who for all his British Admiralty uniform might have commanded Odysseus' ship or cruised with Drake on pirate raids along the Spanish Main—a blunt, no-nonsense, no flub-dub sort of a man, with rigid principles and convictions, nerves like steel, a limited but superb intelligence forged in his will, and put to the service of truth and fairness as he saw it. He was the sort of fellow who was so well in command of himself, so courageous and so single-track-minded that he told them all where to get off, king, prime ministers, peers and whatnot. He wrote, I imagine, just as he talked; gruffly, emphatically, in sharp booming sentences, without grace notes or suavity. He called a spade a spade and swore when he felt like it, which was pretty often. He contradicted people when he knew they were wrong and called people liars when he knew they were lying. He was without polish or tact or even what is ordinarily called good manners, but he was

superb and his memoirs are great fun. . . . Well, as I said, I was recounting all this to Overton and damning Percy Hammond or Tiffany Blake or E. S. Beck or whoever it was that borrowed them from me and never returned them, and hoping that I might get them back some time without buying another set. "Why don't you let us give you the books?" he asked. But I said they were much too expensive, that I couldn't think of it, but that if some Christmas the Doran company still had a lot of unsold copies on the shelves and if he could find a set that was already dirty and shopworn he might send it. And the other day, weeks before Christmas, a brand new set of the books came, with a note from Overton, begging me to accept them as a Christmas present and

how birthdays came up before midnight, and though Hazel's was a full month off there arrived at the house that morning a box of the cigarettes Hazel had liked that night. Meanwhile it had never occurred to me to get any other than the brand I was accustomed to smoking, and I was properly in awe and admiration of Tom's technique of bestowing gifts. I learned a trick or two from him.

STILL even now, so lacking am I in assurance in these matters that I seldom trust myself in selection beyond toys and safety razors, briar pipes, house slippers, dress shirt studs, mufflers, vanity cases, traveling bags and books, mostly books. I have learned something about buying books for

IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS—NO. II.



Maxwell Bodenheimer and Edgar Guest. By Gene Markey

saying that he was sending them early because he might forget it in the Christmas rush. I had forgotten about the books; it was a surprise to get them and a pleasure; it was nice of Overton to remember; but he would have bowled me over if the books had been delivered at my house on Christmas morning.

And for the third, the perfect. Thomas Beer was at our house one night for dinner. Hazel had smoked one of Tom's cigarettes, and when he proffered them to her later on she took another one, with the remark that they had the best flavor of any she had ever smoked, and with a dig about "Burton Rascoe's most abominable blend of burlap and alfalfa you can imagine, and it never occurs to him to get any other kind." Some-

other people. For instance, no bachelor and only the very exceptional father should buy a book for a child without all sorts of inquiries, meditation and examinations. The writing and illustrating of books for children is one of the most profitable forms of hack-writing, as good a graft as writing about Shakespeare or Lincoln or occultism. Not that there aren't plenty of excellent books written and published every year for children, books which often go neglected while utter trash sells by the thousands of copies.

The reason is obvious: Uncle Jim goes into a bookstore to buy some books for his nephew Bobby and his niece Alicia; he has only an approximate notion of their age, no knowledge whatever of their mental devel-

opment, their tastes. He knows only that he ought to get them some books. He goes out with an armload of things with some colored pictures which strike him as being about calculated to suit the aesthetic development and comprehension of low grade riorons, two or three more "solid" books with no pictures in them at all and which neither of the children will ever open after Christmas Day, and possibly a volume or so 'h i has been urged upon him by a proprietor who has been stocked up with them for two seasons.

Uncle Jim may be fortunate enough to pick, entirely by chance, only excellent books; he may be fortunate enough to buy books which, even if they are not adapted to the mental ages of his nieces and nephews are good books which they may grow up to, or which their fathers and mothers will enjoy fully and the children partially when they are read aloud, say books like "The Story of Mankind," by Hendrik Willem Van Loon; "Maya the Bee," by Waldemar Bonsels; "Rootabaga Stories," by Carl Sandburg; "The Well in the Wood," by Bert Leston Taylor; "Alice in Wonderland," by Lewis Carroll; "The Adventures of Doctor Dolittle," by Hugh Lofting; "More Beasts for Worse Children," by Hilaire Belloc; "Martin Pippin of the Apple Orchard," by Eleanor Farjeon; "Daniel Boone," by Stewart Edward White; "Beyond Rope and Fence," by David Greig; "Solaris the Tailor," by William Bowen; or "Mighty Mikko," a collection of Finnish fairy tales by Parker Pillsbury. In other words, he will make no mistake in buying these books or any of the books recommended by librarians or teachers, even if they are not adjusted to the mental development of the children for whom they are intended. The point is that he will please the child more if that child is five years old if he will buy "The Bird Nest Boarding House" or "The Velvetten Rabbit" than if he buys "Rootabaga Stories," which is more readily enjoyed by children ever eleven. He will make a mess of it if he buys blindly and unthinkingly. Most bachelors and spinsters (and most parents) do, which accounts for the enormous sale of children's books which children never look at.

THE selection of gift books for adults is an easier matter. It is not a bad rule to buy for others books you have especially enjoyed, presuming that the friends to whom you wish to send books are of somewhat the same tastes as yourself. It is an affront, of course, to send a novel by Miss Ethel M. Dell to one on whose shelves you have seen "Anne Severn and the Fieldings," "Mr. Prohack," "Tono Bungay," "Ethan Frome" and "The Golden Bowl" or "Jurgen," "Ulysses," "Swann's Way," "Pelle: the Conqueror," "The Growth of the Soil," or "Old People and Things That Pass." It is an affront, likewise, to send any one of these books to one who habitually reads Miss Dell or Isabel Ostrander or Berta Ruck, though possibly you will be rewarded for your affront in heaven.

In the way of gift books in special holiday editions there is an ample selection. I should recommend especially:

"East of the Sun and West of the Moon" (Doran) if only for the illustrations in color by Kay Nielsen. Nielsen has taken a little from all sorts of expert draftsmen—Bokusai and Utamaro, Beardsley, and the illustrators for "La Vie Parisienne," Howard Pyle and the great German poster colorists; but he blended these pilferings into what amounts to genius, if genius it is not, and his illustrations are a pleasure to the eye.

"Moby Dick" (Dodd, Mead), by Herman Melville, an excellently gotten up edition of this indubitable classic of adventuring and philosophizing, illustrated by Mead Shaeffer.

"The Child's Wonder Book" (Doran), by Nathaniel Hawthorne, illustrated by Arthur Rackham.

"Ethan Frome" (Scribner's), by Edith Wharton, a special, limited edition designed and printed by Bruce Rogers, and containing a preface especially written for the edition by Mrs. Wharton, wherein she not only states with remarkable clarity and consciousness her artistic aim in writing the novel, but also gives in a brief space a valuable critique of the art of fiction.

"Candide: Or the Optimist" (Dutton), by Voltaire, a large paper edition of this sa-